News



Marian University in Fond du Lac, Wisconsin, was founded in 1936 by the Congregation of Sisters of St. Agnes. (Courtesy of Marian University)



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So many small, private colleges or universities are facing declining enrollments and financial pressures that the Bernardine Franciscan Sisters became worried about the future of Catholic higher education.

Their own Alvernia University in Reading, Pennsylvania, is financially sound but the sisters were seeing private colleges across the country closing or merging: The Hechinger Report in 2025 found that since 2020, 79 nonprofit schools have closed, merged or announced they will close or merge. Forty-one of those are religious institutions, including 16 Catholic institutions, Hechinger said. Since then at least two more Catholic colleges have closed.

So the sisters began looking for a Catholic college they could help.

"We wanted to promote Catholic higher education on a global level," said Sr. John Ann Proach, the Bernardine Franciscan Sisters' congregational minister. "We looked at a number of schools, but many had big deficits, or big structural needs that we would have to sink a lot of money into."

And then they found Marian University, a sponsored ministry of the Sisters of St. Agnes in Fond du Loc, Wisconsin. Those sisters had an entirely different problem.

"We have 111 sisters, and their median age is 82," said Sr. Sharon Pollnow, general superior of the Sisters of St. Agnes. "We don't know how much time we have as a community — we haven't had new members for over 20 years."

The sisters were worried Marian might have to close because the sisters simply could not run the university anymore. There were ways it could continue on its own, but they wanted to ensure it has their charism baked into its DNA in perpetuity.

Then Alvernia's President Glynis Fitzgerald met Marian President Aaron Sadoff at a conference. Soon Pollnow and Proach were meeting — and finding that while the Sisters of St. Agnes are not Franciscan, the two communities have much in common.

"Our charism, it is very Franciscan," Pollnow said. "We're different, but oh, do we have our values in common."

In early November, the two congregations signed a commitment to begin the process to make the Bernardine Franciscans the sponsors of Marian University. It will be 2027 or 2028 before it becomes official and the university becomes the Marian Campus of Alvernia University.

The Bernardine Franciscans will acquire Marian, but they're not buying it.

"We are giving it as a gift to Alvernia. No money will be exchanged. We're partners in mission," Pollnow said. "They're not saving Marian."

Marian was founded by the Sisters of St. Agnes 90 years ago to educate their own sisters for ministry, just as Alvernia was 68 years ago. And while the two will share resources, each will keep its own identity.

"All of it will be Marian," Pollnow said. "It makes a difference, because the people have invested in this for 90 years in Fond du Lac. … Our concern was also about the faculty and students — these are people who've given their lives to Marian. We want to continue the traditions here."

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Proach is humbled by the responsibility her congregation is taking on to continue the charism of the Sisters of St. Agnes at Marian.

"You're making a decision that needs to continue in perpetuity," she said. "(The Bernardine Franciscan) sisters have to realize we've taken on another congregation's charism to continue that mission."

There are still many things to work through: The deal must get government approval, approval from the accreditation agencies and from the Catholic Church. But both sisters say it is clear the Holy Spirit has brought them together.

As the two looked over each other's prepared remarks for the signing ceremony, they realized they had both written about St. Francis asking God what God wanted him to do and God responded that he should rebuild the church.

Proach said both communities understand that a Catholic college is about much more than a degree.

"We want to ensure we're providing graduates who are ethical professionals. Bridge builders. Truth tellers," she said. "May God bless this new beginning."